DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 585 FL 020 429

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TITLE The Cultural Implications of International Business: Three French Experiments in the United States and Their Classroom Dimension.
PUB DATE 4 Apr 91
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for World Business and the Professions (10th, Ypsilanti, MI, April 3-5, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Communication; Comparative Analysis; *Cultural Context; Employer Employee Relationship; Foreign Countries; *French; Higher Education; *International Trade; *Organizational Climate; Second Language Instruction; *Work Environment

ABSTRACT

The role that international businesses can play in local foreign language instruction is described based on experiences in teaching French at a women's college in Virginia. Personal contacts have brought French businessmen into the classroom and have provided students with an understanding of the relevance of their studies, provided an outreach into the real world, and created an opportunity for discussions about cultural similarities and differences. This paper summarizes those contacts and then discusses the American business environment from the perspective of French businessmen in America. Topics include working conditions such as working hours and vacations, human relationships such as forms of address and use of first names, social philosophy such as "esprit de corps" and employer/employee relationships, and the cultural environment. It is concluded that individuality and optimism are important values in both French and American cultures but they are expressed differently. (LB)

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# The Cultural implications of international business: three French experiments in the United States and their classroom dimension

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(paper read at the Eight Annual Conference on Language for Communication and World Business, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan, April 4, 1991)

As we teach language for communication in a business setting, the availibility in our community of the presence of foreign businessmen can be a valuable resource of information for our students. In our case, three French companies have recently settled in central Virginia. Two are middle sized companies, one is part of a large and nationalized French consortium. French businessmen- and I take the term in its broader sense since some of the persons interviewed are engeneers that work in the corporate world- have therefore come to our community, providing us with hands on experience on the cultural aspects of international business, a view of their native environment and their impressions of the American business environment.

Contacts with those businessmen offer our students precious advantages:

- the justification of the relevance of our function as language teachers and more especially as French for Business teachers. Through them, students see and appreciate the need for cultural awareness to suceed in the market place. They

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see first- handthe need for an applied study of foreign languages.

- this relationship also offers an outreach into the "real" world that can give students professional opportunities, career ideas, starting with the possibilities of internships, experiences abroad and the building of a professional network.

- the opportunity to hear comments on perceived cultural differences and similarities that can make our students more receptive and tolerant for diversity in the workforce and society at large.

My experience has been that personal contact has worked well in bringing those businessmen to the classroom. As the younger recruits among them are eager to discover the various facets of American life, and life on an American campus being one, they accept our invitation willingly. The small size of our town and the presence of an active Alliance Francaise, has given us the opportunity to identify the newcomers and sollicit them in different ways.

They regularly come to the French table, have offered opportunities to earn a trip to France (Bi-centennial of the French Revolution,) offer to participate as jury for the exams of the Chamber of Commerce of Paris.

Such developments are based on the nurturing of human relationships, on the enthusiasm of a few persons who believe in a closer tie between the corporate and the

academic worlds. Language programs are the first ones to benefit for those increased relationships.

During their presentations, and this at a small liberal arts college, where there are no "business majors", the study of the cultural environment of the business setting, becomes our main focus of interest. While giving their impressions of the American working environment, they also reveal what makes the French business environment. Human relationships, the organization of work itself, schedules, attitudes towards time and space, self and society, authority reflect a specific culture, that is to say signs which consciously or unconsciously bind people together with beliefs and values. The way people conduct business, the way they relate with each other in a working environment is fraught with rich cultural messages and can be analyzed as another dimension of cultural anthropology.

It is impossible in a short paper to make a comprehensive analysis of similarities and differences between the French and American business environment. It has been detailed in Understanding Cultural Differences: Germans, French and Americans by Edward Hall (Intercultural Press, 1990) and Cultural Misunderstanding: the French-American Experiment by Raymonde Carroll (University of Chicago, 1988.) Instead, I intend to focus on the comments that the French businessmen of our community made when describing their adaptation to the American workforce. Their experinecs could be viewed as an addendum to those two books and show that those

individual cases, with their limitations can sometimnes support but also contradict generalizations that have been made. This random sample reflects another and important dimension that has to be accounted for. As cultural anthropology is not an exact science, it acquires shades of various gradations, subtle behavioral differences that are impressionistic in nature but which also belong to the total picture.

Working conditions

The French are sensitive to a different schedule. In France, they would work longer hours, sometimes still at work at 7:30 p.m. while their American counterparts leave by 5 but will take much shorter vacations and might find the need to come work on week ends. A longer lunch pause, with ample time to leave the work place seems essential to the French. So, all in all, employees, on both sides of the Atlantic, work the same amount of hours but those will be distributed differently. The French would reserve larger blocks of time for their private lives away from public life (work) in the form of sacred week ends and long (5 weeks) summer vacations.

The definition of working space attracted some interesting comments. Access to an outside view with natural light is perceived as the most desirable element in office design, one that according to them enhances productivity on the job.

Windowless offices give to most of them a strong sense of claustrophobia.

Comfort and availability of most recent office technology is also a striking feature. They are impressed by the fact that there is a computer at every desk, requiring from everybody to type their own reports. Secretarial help, mostly women, would be more prevalent in the French office.

Human relationships

As to human relationships, the French have to get used to the absence of daily handshakes that are rituals in every French office, morning and evening. The connotation conveyed by this message is so great that its casual avoidance is at first misunderstood. But, very soon, the French employee is put totally at ease by the apparent easygoing nature of relationships at all echelons of the company. He (no women have been expatriated) will be called by his first name and is expected to call others, even superiors, by their first names, which does not come easily to a French person. In a French company, superiors remain "Monsieur.." There is a widespread use of referring to colleagues by their last name, as in the case of "Charvat" while first names might be reserved for secretaries with a slight tone of paternalism in it. The difference between the "tu" and the "vous" form is still heavily stressed in the French company, although in many cases now barriers are less

rigidly enforced. The "tu" form and the referral of a superior by his/her first name might be very acceptable at all levels in some less traditional environments. In any case, for the French coming to work to the United States, to call others by their first names is refreshing and well taken and they often shorten their double names for the occasion (Jean-Pierre becomes Pierre.)

The congeniality of relationships among colleagues and superiors surprises the French businessman. He is surprised by the efforts made by the management to get to know the employees and he comments that he finds the management more easily accessible. The management for instance encourages communication with small groups of employees at all levels and this, for instance, during informal lunches. All new employees are welcome with welcome parties, employees are congratulated with "employee of the month" award, etc..
It is this non confrontational environment that surprises the French the most. They have the impression of a general concensus behind managerial decisions, that appears to be unrealistic to them. They are surprised at the lack of unions for employees, especially in a large company. They admit missing the opportunity for direct and open criticism that makes French workers so assertive of their rights.
Philosophy
The human environment reflects in fact a specific social philosophy. By emphasizing smoooth personal human

relationships, the management tries to create an "esprit de corps", "esprit-maison" as it is often called. In the relationship employer/employee, the manager becomes a coach at the head of a team, a chearleader, totally confident in the product or the service to be sold. Lee Ioccoca and Victor Kiam even took their cheerleading to television ("I liked the product, I bought the company!") The association with sports can be extended to the employees who must be team-players to win over the opposite team. In this environment, criticism of the management is not a way to victory but the opposite. It is well known that the French have never been "team" oriented. They excel in individual sports and do much better in small groups where they feel they cannot lose their identity. The need for free expression of one's own "marginalism" is essential to the French. In the workplace, the right to dissent is endlessly enforced, directly or indirectly. For that reason, they comment on the "boyscout" mentality of the American corporate world. The "esprit de corps" impresses them while at the same time putting them ill at ease for the various constraints that it places on individual expression. They resist the regimentation that "esprit de corps" alludes to and are a little bit cynical as to the "follow the leader" and "how to feel healthy on the job" spirit that characterizes the American company newsletter. Its counterpart would voice various concerns of employees.

In this effort to create a positive image of the company as a homogeneous whole, the French see a prevalent tendency in the American company to present reports in a positive manner, what works. There is little self-doubt, little self-criticism. At regular "state of the company" addresses, the President is there to boost the moral of the troops. It is firmly believed that success attracts success. Difficulties are not alluded to in public communications, internally or externally, but rather dealt within closed doors. Problems might be addressed in a more direct and open manner in France, perhaps just for the sake of an open debate. The French workers are therefore surprised at the apparent docility and good spirits of their American counterparts. They are impressed but cannot totally identify.

The cultural environment of American and French business reflects two basically different attitudes towards life, while at the same time, they remain similar because of their strong belief in economic competition. The French being in nature far more pessimistic than Americans will call good-natured optimism "innocent" or "naive." The French are skeptical, they are the champions of the "oui,mais", in business and elsewhere. Intellectualism should have little place in a business setting, and yet it shapes people's view of the world. They will place an intellectual search for truth, individual freedom before loyalty to the company, the

group and in that search tensions are bound to arise between management and employees.

For the same belief in optimism, Americans are seen by the French are excellent salesmen, the best in fact. The President of a larger American company sees the commercial function as the primary one within the company and he will make himself available for customers if necessary. Selling on the contrary is a function that the French have only recently discovered, they even use an English word for that: "marketing." Selling in France has never been considered a noble pursuit. Service to customers in France is far from the one that one receives in the United States. There is a strong belief that the product should speak for itself. A delicious meal can be accompanied by atrocious service. Shop attendants can be as rude as their products are elegant. The Frenchman has had to learn how to sell. It does not come naturally and business schools now concentrate on that function. Total bliss, total satisfaction is in fact just an illusion. It is perceived as the best way to avoid complacency. Those are philosophical notions that are ingrained in the national psyche and that also determine business attitudes. Education has shaped us differently: the confidence of the young American basket-ball player who constanly hears "We are the best!" is counterbalanced by a well informed young French intellectual who loves to debate and thinks that the system will not take advantage of him.

All French businessmen however adjust very well in the American environment, despite those differences. This is due certainly to the presence of more similarities than differences among both cultures. They find it less stressful than the French workplace whose daily tempo is faster and love for debate constant. Stress which is in fact an American word is expressed in the United States differently with the desire for concrete immediate results. The long term is two years, while the French justify more readily losses in the short term to risk gain with a far reaching "planification."

The French see themselves as theoreticians while they perceive Americans as pragamatists. This love of "praxis" in the United States also explains the need for concensus. Dissent might therefore be expressed by leaving the company and forming one's own company, an action that shows faith in the entrepreneurial spirit, but seldom within the company.

What can one learn from those comments?

First, that the way we perceive ourselves might be totally different from the way other cultures perceive us. The French see Americans, in the corportae world, more conformist than American see themselves. Individuality and optimism are important values in both our cultures and what makes them in fact so close to each other. And yet, those values are expressed differently.

Cultural behaviors are also steeped in puzzling contradictions. The French, despite their inherent existentialism are the champions of "joie de vivre." Conformity is also found in the way the French dress, eat. There is conformity in being anti-conformist, being champion of the "oui,mais."

All those businessmen however justify the richness of their experience by saying that the two cultures combine themselves in the workforce quite effectively. The French improve their salesmanship and their human relationship skills. American acquire a softer sale approach, a respect for the study of languages and foreign cultures, a better informed view of the world. And yet, they all agree that if they have been changed by their American experience, its transfer, even for minor details, to another culture needs to be handled with much caution. There is a national cultural background that determines behavior and changes might be misunderstood or seen with apprehension or irony. It becomes also clear that the cultural environment of international business is determined by social history (bourgeois/working class tension,) a different philosophy of education, a general outlook on life, the nature of business (nationalized or not) and economic conditions.

In the case of our students, they have discovered through those businessmen the opportunity to learn about the American and French corporate worlds, about a new facet of

French civilization that they did not know much about and most of all about themselves.

Acknowledgements: My special thanks to Marion Berry, Rémy Bera, Dominique Sanchette, Rene de Préneuf, Jean-François Gervais, Herman Rogers, Hugues de Rosemont.